



## **Is Tony the Tiger making you fat?**

New research examines the influence of childhood advertising on adulthood eating

Tony the tiger; Snap, Crackle and Pop; Captain Birdseye; the Pillsbury Doughboy; Ronald McDonald; the Laughing Cow; the Green Giant; Chester Cheetah.

Could the beloved advertising characters of our childhoods still be influencing our food choices as adults?

New research led by Dr Paul Connell of Cass Business School, part of City University London, suggests so.

In a paper to be published in the Journal of Consumer Research, Dr Connell and colleagues Professor Merrie Brucks and Dr Jesper Nielsen of the University of Arizona, investigate how exposure to adverts in childhood can lead to enduring biases that favor the advertised products.

They found that:

- Childhood advertising exposure leads to positive feelings for the advertising characters, which in turn leads to favorable evaluations of the brand's nutritiousness years later
- People who harbor strongly positive feelings toward an advertising character resist changing their minds about the products featured in the adverts
- These effects are not limited to the products that were originally advertised - if people continue to have positive feelings toward advertising characters, they also rated fictitious new brand extensions (invented by the researchers) as healthier.

Dr Connell comments: "People should check the labels the products they've loved since childhood. It's possible that affectionate feelings for brand characters mean they are overlooking relevant nutritional information. Also, many advertising characters have been around for decades. Parents should be mindful that their judgment of products associated with ads they saw as children themselves, might be clouded.

"At the same time, this research suggests that public health and safety campaigns aimed at children may affect them throughout their lives—but only if children develop positive feelings for the ads. Thus, we recommend that health-oriented media campaigns targeted at children should aim to relate to children on an emotional level, for example, by emphasizing loveable characters and fun narratives."

In four experimental studies, the researchers examined adults' judgments of the healthiness of various products, some of which were heavily advertised in their childhood years.

Participants viewed one of two sets of images. The first were of advertising characters that would have been widely advertised when the participants were children. The second were images of advertising characters that were also widely advertised, but not until after participants had reached adulthood.

Participants then reported their feelings about the characters in the ads, and also rated the products featured in the ads on how healthy they were.

The researchers found that exposure to advertising in childhood (before age 13) can indeed create biases that favor the products that are supported by the ads.

People rated presweetened cereals and french fries as healthier when they were exposed to ads for these products as children.

These biases can be explained statistically by the positive feelings that people feel toward the characters in the advertising.

Children learn how to understand and evaluate advertising as they gain knowledge and maturity. At first, children respond to TV commercials as if they were entertainment programming.

Even once they can tell the difference between programming and ads, children respond to the upbeat messages in advertising less critically than adults because they do not fully understand the nature of persuasion. Thus, they tend to receive ad messages with little skepticism.

From a very young age, children are targeted with ad messages that emphasize fun and happiness, especially for food products and toys. Based at least in part on these ads, they can develop beliefs about brands that may be relevant to them for many years.

The researchers focused on advertising characters because children often develop affection for these characters that has little to do with their actual consumption of the food product.

Dr Connell concludes: "We suggest that parents discuss the persuasive nature of advertising with their children, and encourage them to develop critical thinking skills in response to advertising messages. They may wish to point out that commercials use funny stories and exciting characters to entertain the viewer, but that commercials may not provide all the important information about the product. For very young children, parents might want to limit the amount of advertising that their children see until the children are old enough to have these conversations."

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#### **Notes to Editors:**

For a copy of the full research report or to speak to one of the researchers, please contact Miranda Thomas, PR Manager, Cass Business School, [miranda.thomas.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:miranda.thomas.1@city.ac.uk) 020 7040 5274

*How Childhood Advertising Exposure Can Create Biased Product Evaluations That Persist into Adulthood* by Dr Paul M. Connell, Senior Lecturer at Cass Business School, City University London; Dr Merrie Brucks, Eckert Professor of Marketing and Psychology, University of Arizona; and Dr Jesper H. Nielsen, Joseph W. Newman Associate Professor of Marketing, University of Arizona.

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